

Statement on the Observance of Juneteenth
June 19, 2015

On this day 150 years ago, more than 2 years after President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, the slaves of Galveston, Texas, finally received word that the Civil War was over. They were free. A century and a half later, Americans still recognize this occasion, Juneteenth, as a symbolic milestone on our journey toward a more perfect Union. At churches and in parks, lined up for parades and gathered around the barbecue pit, communities come together and celebrate the enduring promise of our country: that all of us are created equal.

Yet this year, our celebrations are tinged with sorrow. Our prayers are with the nine members of the Mother Emanuel community—nine members of our American family—whose God-given rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness were so cruelly snatched away. Our hearts go out to their families, their friends, and the entire city of Charleston.

We don't have to look far to see that racism and bigotry, hate and intolerance, are still all too alive in our world. Just as the slaves of Galveston knew that emancipation is only the first step toward true freedom, just as those who crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge 50 years ago knew their march was far from finished, our work remains undone. For as long as people still hate each other for nothing more than the color of their skin—and so long as it remains far too easy for dangerous people to get their hands on a gun—we cannot honestly say that our country is living up to its highest ideals. But Juneteenth has never been a celebration of victory, or an acceptance of the way things are. Instead, it's a celebration of progress. It's an affirmation that despite the most painful parts of our history, things do get better. America can change.

So no matter our color or our creed, no matter where we come from or who we love, today is a day to find joy in the face of sorrow, to count our blessings, and hold the ones we love a little closer. And tomorrow is a day to keep marching.

Categories: Statements by the President : Juneteenth.

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